

Salt and Light

Last week, an acquaintance of mine, an attorney in town whose sons grew up with my sons, spotted me eating a sandwich at a deli round the corner, and struck up a conversation. The conversation resembled several I have been having lately, both with church members and other folks in the community. It starts off as more a confession than a conversation, and runs something like this:

“I’m a little ashamed to say it, but I’ve stopped watching the news. It’s just too much, too depressing. For a while after the presidential inauguration, I would get up in the morning, and the first thing I would do is go to my computer and check the headlines. Surely, I kept thinking, the news would get better. But it hasn’t. Repealing the Affordable Care Act. Canceling environmental protections. Closing the borders. Stranding refugees in airports. Hanging up on the Australian Prime Minister. Every day it’s something new, something awful.

“So I’ve decided, for my own sanity, to take a break. No more headlines in the morning. No more checking the *New York Times*. No more batting my head against the wall. I signed up for a yoga class and I’m learning to breathe deeply.”

I know the feeling. My yoga class is on Tuesdays and Fridays. Deep breathing is always a good idea, and I was on the brink of taking this sermon in the same direction. *For the next few weeks at least, I told myself, try to avoid mentioning anything controversial. Take pity on those poor souls who come to church seeking refuge from the news. Bless their hearts - they need a break.*

And so, I had resolved to make this Sunday a stress-free zone. Not a word about refugees languishing in overcrowded camps. Nothing about the minimum wage. *Onay* on the border wall and no mention of tweets unless they refer to actual birdsong. For the opening hymn we will sing “Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam” and to close, “Breathe on Me, Breath of God.”

And then I opened my Bible to the appointed readings for the day. (Preachers really should avoid the Bible; it’s always getting in the way of their best laid plans.) There I found the prophet Isaiah meddling.

Oh, he says he's speaking for God, but it sure *feels* like meddling. Lifting his voice like Ken Kronholz's trumpet, he blasts God's people who worship in the recently-rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. God's people have returned from exile in Babylon. They have reclaimed the ruined city, restored the temple, bought new instruments for the praise band, and printed up new guidelines for fast days.

Their liturgy is perfect. There are never typos in the bulletin. The choir is never late to begin the service, and the sermon never goes over 12 minutes, tops. Yes, worship in the temple is a thing of beauty. You'd think Isaiah, who purports to speak for God, would agree.

But he doesn't. *You only fast to quarrel and to fight. And as soon as the fast is over, you go right back to oppress all your workers. Do you think that's the kind of fasting God wants? Let me tell you what God wants. I'd have thought that after all these centuries of living in covenant with God, you'd know, but let me lay it out one more time.*

**Is not the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?**

**Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?**

**Then will your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will spring up quickly . . .
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.¹**

¹ Isaiah 58:6-10a

In an attempt to escape this prophetic meddling coming from the Old Testament, I jumped over to the New Testament with hopes that the Gospel reading would provide an out. Instead, what I found was a direct link.

Jesus tells us that he has come to fulfill the law and the prophets, not to abolish them. He stands as firmly in the prophetic tradition as anybody named Amos, Micah, or Isaiah. We meet him on the mountain where, having delivered what we tend to call “the Sermon on the Mount,” he gathers his motley little band of disciples together and reminds them who they are.

“You are the salt of the earth,” he tells them. **“You are the light of the world.”**

Salt that that has lost its flavor is good for nothing. It gets thrown out and trampled under foot. Light that is hidden under a bushel basket does no one any good. **“ . . . let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”²**

Jesus is not talking merely about food drives and soup kitchens. He’s talking about righteousness -- salty righteousness -- the kind of righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, the kind of righteousness that reflects God’s light.

Jill Duffield, the editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, reminds us that Jesus is speaking directly to you and me:

The word of Jesus from on high is in service for those being trampled underfoot. Jesus doesn’t tell us to tend to our own, keep our heads down, keep our noses clean and our hides safe. We are told in Isaiah to shout out the rebellion, the apostasy, the injustice and exploitation of the vulnerable we see. We are to be as aggravating and irritating as salt in the wound of those who seek to hurt and destroy on God’s holy mountain. We are to shine a flood light on evil, cruelty and meanness. The righteousness that exceeds that of scribes and Pharisees is the righteousness that fulfills the whole law: love of God and neighbor, all our neighbors, no matter the cost.

² Matthew 5:13, 14

You are that salt: of the earth. You are that light: of the world. Shout. Irritate. Burn so brightly it hurts the eyes of those who proudly fast and worship but fail to feed and house. This is no ordinary time, either. Jesus' band of fishermen, tax collectors and rag tag sinners must be bold, confident not in their expertise, power or abilities, but unquestionably loyal to the one who settles for nothing less than our lives.³

My friend who stopped me last week to tell me he was tuning out the noise from Washington, D.C. in order to preserve his own sanity was not wrong to offer himself a little tender loving care. But if the Church of Jesus Christ should fail to put its light upon a lampstand now, our nation will slip further into darkness – the darkness of idolatrous nationalism, the darkness of naïve populism, the darkness that is determined to live only within its own manufactured reality.

That is not the fast that God chooses. That is not how you and I are to be salt and light. That is not the way disciples of Jesus Christ radiate God's love for the whole world.

One of President Trump's closest advisors, Steve Bannon, believes that the United States is in an existential struggle with Islam. He and others who have Mr. Trump's ear believe that they are the defenders and protectors of Christians.

There well may be an existential struggle going on, but it's not between Muslims and Christians. It's a struggle within American Christianity. We disciples of Christ are being called to show the world how to keep the fast that God desires. All the prophets through the ages – Jesus included – are clear about how to do that. We do it by loving God and neighbor with justice, kindness, and humility.

Breathe deeply, beloved. Take care of yourselves. Practice Sabbath. But do not forget: You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.

© Brant S. Copeland, Pastor
First Presbyterian Church,
Tallahassee, Florida

³ Jill Duffield, *Presbyterian Outlook*, "Looking into the Lectionary." February 3, 2017, <https://pres-outlook.org/category/ministry-resources/looking-into-the-lectionary/>